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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed for both experienced and novice educators who want to participate in lifelong learning programs. The various sections of the paper (1) explain the principles of communicative competence, (2) apply these principles to processes of lifelong learning, and (3) describe the benefits of effective communication for the teaching and learning of the elderly. A bibliography of 173 resources for promoting lifelong learning and communication is attached. (RL)

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IMPROVING LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

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Dr. Schuetz has recently completed a funded project teaching communication skills to the institutionalized elderly. She serves as a member of the New Mexico Aging Coalition, Albuquerque Aging Coalition, Speech Communication Association Caucus on Aging, and the Gerontology Committee at the University of New Mexico. This paper is extracted from an essay she presented at a recent symposium entitled "Humanities and Aging Studies" at the University of Missouri-Rolla.

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IMPROVING LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

The term "communication" is the God-Word for our times. Not only are the problems of communication associated with most human and social issues, but the resolving of those problems is often attributed to the effectiveness of communication. As a result, the word "communication" has magical connotations. The magical formula reads something like this: If only persons could improve their communication, then most personal, social, political, and even, international problems would be solved. This faith in the magic of effective communication extends to proposals and innovations for the education of adults. In her report for the American Association for Higher Education, Josephs advocates competency-based instruction for adults embodying these skills of communication: "values clarification, decision-making, problem-solving, group interaction, critical thinking or analysis."¹ Furthermore, she contends that these competencies in communication are essential for both institutional programs and educators who seek to serve the needs of older learners.

Most educators recognize that effective communication has an actual rather than a magical impact on teaching and learning. These educators have realized that their relationships with students are as important as content, learning does not always come from textbooks, and each student has a special contribution to make to knowledge through his or her own experience.² It is these same assumptions that have led educators to the recognition of the importance of communication in the learning process. This essay is designed for both experienced and novice educators who want to participate in lifelong learning programs. In approaching this goal, the essay (1) explains communicative competence, (2) applies these principles to processes of lifelong learning, and (3) describes the benefits of effective communication for the teaching and

learning of the elderly.

What is Communicative Competence?

The principle of communicative competence rests on the premise that a person's ability to communicate effectively improves both social functioning and personal growth. Various writers have defined communicative competence. For example, Bochner and Kelly say it is "a person's ability to interact effectively with other persons."³ Swanson and Delia contend that competence largely depends on the ability of the communicator to take the perspective of the other persons involved in the communicative exchange.⁴ Weinstein adds that competence involves the ability of the communicator to define and adapt to the demands of different situational contexts; he stresses the behavioral flexibility of the communicator.⁵ Foote and Cottrell say that "competence denotes capabilities to meet and deal with a changing world, to formulate ends, and implement them."⁶ Additionally, they note that some degree of good health, intelligence, empathy, autonomy, judgment, and creativity are needed if a person is to achieve communicative competence.⁷

Obviously then, it is unrealistic to conclude that all old persons regardless of physical, mental, and environmental circumstances can participate effectively in lifelong learning. However, it is realistic to assume that when teachers possess these attributes that they gain increased capability to deal with a wide variety of learners and contexts for learning. In completing a recent lifelong learning project with the institutionalized old over the age of 80 who had disabilities, I found that learning and enjoyment of learning both take place.⁸ However, this learning depends on instructors who can use the principles of competent communication.

How is Lifelong Learning Affected by Communicative Competence?

Lifelong learning stresses learning for the sake of learning rather than taking course work for grades, credit, or certification. Additionally lifelong learning is for persons who want to learn to express themselves, "to communicate, and to question the world" through their own experiences.⁹ This type of learning "occurs throughout life, is often imperceptible and is all encompassing. Sometimes it is sparked by personal experiences and may be part of the intrinsic value of acquiring knowledge for its own sake."¹⁰ Lifelong learning differs from lifespan education which is a planned educational program designed to help persons to deal with job changes, retirement, illness, and bereavement. In contrast, lifelong learning is concerned with the subject matter relevant to the communication, that is, "the formation and transformation of values throughout a lifetime."¹¹

Contrary to popular assumptions, old persons are eager and capable learners. More specifically, old "differ from young learners in that they tend to respond more slowly, are more sensitive to interference while engaged in a learning task, and often show a decline in immediate and short-term memory, . . . but they surpass young learners in verbal and integrating ability."¹² Furthermore, the motivational level of the older learners is often high because they see the potential for applying their lifetime of experience.

Lifelong learning differs from adult education in general since it is not concerned with instructional programs per se. Instead, lifelong learning is a reciprocal and complex pedagogical process involving learning from older persons, teaching them, using them as teachers, facilitating peer learning among older adults, and utilizing older learners as educational resources within the community. In sum then, lifelong learning is personal, innovative, and useful.

The list below offers general guidelines for educators who wish to include older persons in their teaching, learning, and research.

1. Assist older learners in becoming aware of their own experiences through dialogues, classes, workshops, and seminars.
2. Involve our own high school and university students in the learning process of older persons by encouraging them to do interviews, oral histories, and research for their own coursework.
3. Solicit older persons as lecturers, panelists, and discussion leaders to comment on subject matter from their perspective.
4. Invite older persons from your own disciplines to participate in conventions, in forums, and in editorial work for journals.
5. Sponsor seminars or discussions in which the topic of aging and your discipline can be discussed jointly by older persons, students, and faculty.
6. Encourage our college and universities to institute reduced tuition programs for older learners who wish to study on campus.
7. Offer educational programs through alternative delivery systems such as through Senior Centers, churches, museums, retirement homes, and hospitals.

The suggestions listed above typify the wide range of situations available to programs of lifelong learning. The success of these learning processes increases when practitioners and learners practice competent communication. More specifically, three principles of competence relate directly to processes of lifelong learning. These include: "(1) ability to formulate and achieve objectives; (2) ability to collaborate effectively with others, i.e., to be interdependent; and (3) ability to adapt appropriately to situational and environmental variations."¹³

First, practitioners need to formulate and achieve objectives by establishing definitive research and pedagogical goals and plans of communication for carrying out these goals. For example, teachers should decide how to inform learners about subject matter, decide upon issues for discussion, consider strategies for involving students, and determine methods for sharing and disseminating information associated with the learning goals. Researchers should define their objectives and determine a communicative plan for achieving these objectives such as phrasing and ordering questions, deciding on ways of securing the data they are seeking, and informing subjects about the purpose and use of the data.

Learners also need goals for themselves. While practitioners can assist learners in specifying these goals through formal techniques of value clarification and through informal discussion and assessment, learners still need to establish personal goals. Learners should make a commitment to give time and to engage in sharing. Perhaps the best option is for practitioners and learners to participate jointly in the framing of these goals. For example, I approach learners by asking them what they know about the content, how they see the content affecting them, and what their problems or questions are about the content. Their responses serve as the basis for the goals of learning.

Second, an understanding of and an ability for collaboration aids the success of the learning process. Collaboration means an attitude of joint participation--working with ideas, issues, options. Practitioners need to consider themselves as co-learners, and learners need to recognize that each person has equally valid opinions and experiences. Effective communication involves giving messages and accepting and respecting the messages of others. Practitioners can establish a model for this kind of collaborative communication by asking questions, using clarification, listening empathically, giving

frequent and appropriate feedback, encouraging learners to take turns at responding and talking, discouraging interruptions, and participating fully themselves in the communicative exchange.

In working with institutionalized old persons, I found that old persons often have difficulty focusing on the topic, may talk too long, and may interrupt frequently. Practitioners can guide the communicative interaction by their own collaborative behavior. When older learners are healthy and alert, they practice collaboration with very little assistance. Collaboration is as important for researchers as it is for teachers. For example, persons conducting interviews, collecting data, or doing oral history should guide respondents and yet be willing and able to ask questions, comment, interact, and direct the focus of the communication.

Finally, the practice of communicative competence in lifelong learning should encourage appropriate adaptation of both practitioners and learners to a wide variety of contexts. Adapting to situational differences may require altering one's traditional teaching or research formats to accommodate for a slower pace of exchanging information, scheduling longer periods for interactions, accounting for extra time needed to establish relationships with learners. The format for learning may involve working as a team, engaging in dialogue, using discussion, or primarily being a listener. Those involved in lifelong learning know that much learning occurs outside of the traditional classroom or laboratory and should be able to adapt to different settings. Practitioners can better adapt to older learners if they have general knowledge about the problems and promises of aging.

Oftentimes, social rituals will emerge as part of the learning situation. Practitioners should expect to have a snack and/or to engage in chit-chat before they enter into their learning process. Learners need to understand the

norms of the learning situation and how they are expected to act. Both practitioners and learners should be flexible with the time of the learning projects. Some sessions may be quite long, and others might be short depending on the interests and energy of the learners. Whatever the case, the goals can be attained more effectively if practitioners and learners are competent in their ability to adapt to a variety of situations.

A certain degree of communicative competence is necessary for everyone who participates in lifelong learning programs. By developing competence to formulate objectives, engage in collaboration, and adapt to situations, practitioners can develop appropriate strategies for clarifying values, investigating traditions, and understanding relationships of older persons. Without this competence, practitioners may approach adult learners as objects of study or teaching and in doing so fail to benefit from personal interaction with older persons. With competence, both learners and practitioners can participate in a mutually educational and humanizing process that will permit them to experience the promise and address the problems of growing older.

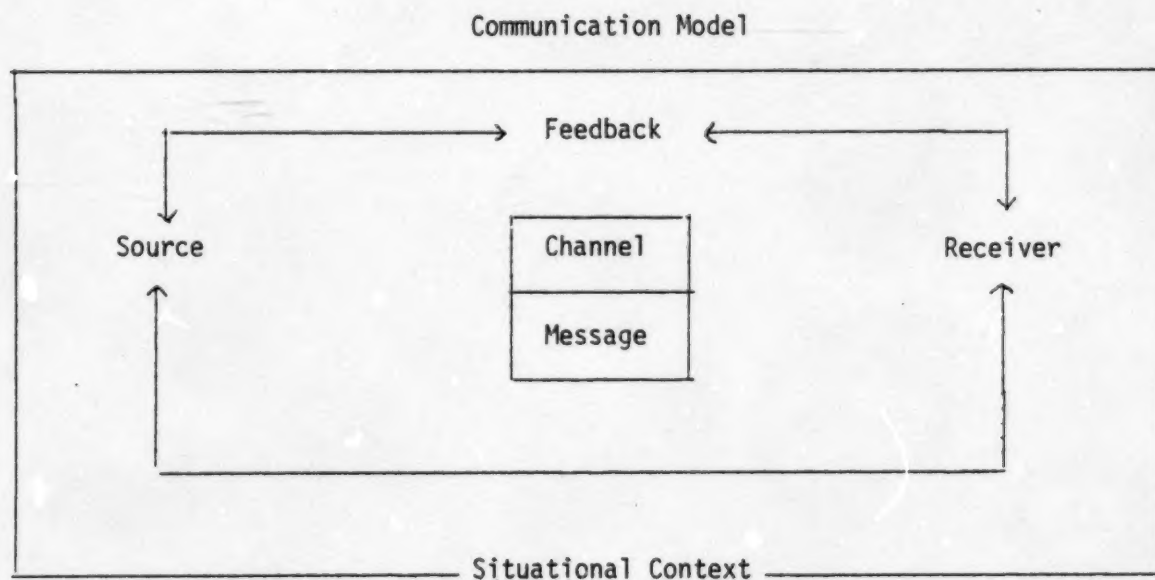
What Benefits Result from Competent Communication?

Research studies conclude that the circumstances of growing older create communication problems. Among the causes of these problems are retirement, isolation, physical disabilities, lack of transportation, separation from family, changing residences, and lack of knowledge about channels of communication. These circumstances create problems because they impede, distort, or complicate the ability of older persons to communicate as effectively and easily as they once did.

A basic communication model consists of a source which refers to the sender of the message; a message which involves language, structure, content,

and relationship; channels which include medium through which messages are sent such as by mail, phone, newspaper; receivers which are the recipients of the messages or the communication; situational contexts which includes where and when the message is sent as well as number of persons and location of the communication; and feedback which is the verbal reaction to the message.¹⁴

This basic model assumes that each part of the model affects each other in a mutual-causal manner, so source affects and is affected by receiver, context, channels, feedback, and situation. All variables are affected by all others.



This model can be useful in classifying problems that may be associated with older learners.¹⁵ In the first column, the listing of problems offers challenges to teachers who instruct older persons, particularly those over-65. The second column specifies benefits that would result when competent communication is modeled by teachers and used as instructional goals for learners.

Lack of Competence--Problems

Presence of Competence--Benefits

SOURCE	lacks knowledge has psychological and physical impairments has dogmatic opinions has outdated values	promotes new knowledge learns how to compensate for impairments creates ability to listen to others becomes aware of values of others
CHANNEL	makes incorrect choice of channel for message lacks available channels	learns how to use channels for different types of messages provides channels for interaction
MESSAGE	lacks clarity in message lacks interaction skills is unfamiliar with new codes	learns how to be more clear learns turn-taking and clarification learns new codes and when to use them
FEEDBACK	uses poor listening habits uses inappropriate feedback	learns ways for active listening learns ways to make feedback more clear and appropriate
RECEIVER	lacks understanding of source lacks understanding of verbal code	learns role-taking strategies learns questioning strategies
SITUATION	inability to adapt to a large variety of situations lacks knowledge about contextual rules for communication	provides various situations for communication learns how situations require different types of communication

If those involved in lifelong learning are aware of some of the problems with communication and know how to modify these problems through competence in communication, they can promote understanding between persons, enhance the learning process, and realize the magic of effective communication.

FOOTNOTES

¹Mary Jim Josephs, "Adapting Institutions to the Adult Learner: Experiments in Progress," in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D. C.: Association for Higher Education, 1978), p. 12.

²Such assumptions correspond with those of several sources on communication in the classroom: Gerald Phillips, David Butt and Nancy Metzger, Communication in Education: A Rhetoric of Schooling (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1974); Gene Stanford and Albert E. Roark, Teachers and Learners: The Interactive Process of Education (Boston: Allyn-Bacon, 1974); and Edmund J. Amidon and Ned A. Flanders, The Role of the Teacher in the Classroom: A Manual for Understanding and Improving Teacher Classroom Behavior (Minneapolis: Association for Productive Teaching, 1967).

³Arthur P. Bochner and Clifford W. Kelly, "Interpersonal Competence: Rationale, Philosophy and Implementation of a Conceptual Framework," The Speech Teacher, 23 (November 1974), 288.

⁴David L. Swanson and Jesse G. Delia, The Nature of Human Communication (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976), pp. 28-35.

⁵Eugene A. Weinstein, "The Development of Interpersonal Competence" in Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research, ed., David A. Goslin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 756-757.

⁶N. N. Foote and L. S. Cottrell, Identity and Interpersonal Competence (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 49.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸Janice Schuetz explains the need for and value of communication in "Lifelong Learning: Communication Education for the Elderly," Communication Education, 29 (January 1980), 33-41.

⁹"Report of UNESCO International Communication on the Development of Education" in Walter F. Mondale, "The Next Step: Lifelong Learning," Change (October 1976), 43.

¹⁰Lotte Marcus, "Ageing and Education" in David Hobman, ed., The Social Challenge of Ageing (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 128.

¹¹Ibid., p. 126.

¹²Ibid., p. 127; and Charles I. Bunting, "The Federal Lifelong Learning Project" in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), p. 4.

¹³Arthur P. Bochner and Clifford W. Kelly, "Interpersonal Competence: Rationale, Philosophy and Implementation of a Conceptual Framework," The Speech Teacher, 23 (November 1974), 288.

¹⁴Similar models are described in most beginning textbooks related to Communication Theory. This particular model is adapted from Kenneth E. Andersen, Persuasion: Theory and Practice (Boston: Allyn-Bacon, 1971), p. 24.

¹⁵Herbert J. Oyer and E. Jane Oyer, "Communicating with Older People: Basic Considerations" in Communication and Aging, Oyer and Oyer, eds. (Baltimore: University Park, 1976).

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